

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 1/21/14

Place: County Building in Vernal, Utah

Present: Scott Chew (co-chair, rancher/landowner), Heather Hoyt (Uintah County Public Lands), Mark Raymond (Uintah County), Dixie Sadlier (BLM), Stephanie Graham (Transcon Environmental), Natasha Gruber (NRCS/Mule Deer Fdn),), Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Jimi Gragg (UDWR), Eric Ellis (UDWR), Garrick Hall (Farm Bureau), Misty Roberts (XTO Energy), Kirk Wood (Duchesne County), Alan Clark (UDWR), Stan Baker (Mule Deer Foundation), Pat Rainbolt (UDWR), Evan Guymon (Duchesne Co. Conservation District), Terrell Thayne (UGIP), Boyd Kitchen (USU Extension), Dean Richens (American Gilsonite), Mike McKee (Uintah County), Tamara Naumann (NPS – Dinosaur NM), Stephanie Tomkinson (QEP Energy), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Upcoming Sage-grouse Summit

Lorien reminded the group that there will be a sage-grouse summit, free of charge, held Feb 18-19 at the DNR building in Salt Lake. A link to register will be emailed to the group so we can have accurate headcounts for food.

Draft EIS for BLM and USFS Sage-Grouse amendments

January 29 is the deadline for comments on the Draft EIS for BLM and USFS. The group discussed a number of items in the document:

- 640-acre minimum lease size is one proposal for moving forward on oil and gas leasing.
- Definition of an active lek (all states use the same method). The group suggested that the state be given the authority to declare a specific lek abandoned/destroyed before the 10 years would normally be up, under special circumstances. Lorien will add this comment to the BLM comments.
- Mike McKee explained how the county and the Utah Association of Counties have approached their comments. They have focused their efforts on finding where Alternative D, the preferred alternative, works, and in other cases, generally going with the stipulations in Alternative E. They are supportive of using the states' maps (Alt E maps).
- Alan noted that all other states do not lump fire in with other disturbances. When the state of Utah comments, they will include a way of dealing with fire that is more along these lines. Key elements include: 1) all fires will be rehabilitated, and 2) if 30% or more of sage-grouse habitat within an SGMA burns within 3 years, then a detailed assessment will be done to determine whether mitigation is needed. This is being developed as an amendment to how the Utah plan handles fire. It will be presented to the Plan

Implementation Team at the Summit in February, and will be considered by PIC and then the governor as an amendment to the Utah plan. Lorien will note the groups' support of having a specific way of handling fire, apart from other disturbances, in the final EIS.

- Many attendees (county, energy industry, and others) at the meeting have already made comments. At the next meeting, Stephanie Tomkinson will present the comments submitted by QEP to help educate the sage-grouse group on energy concerns.
- Boyd Kitchen asked whether it will really be possible for the BLM or USFS to be able to pick a map that does not cover all occupied habitat. The group discussed the question but did not come to a definitive answer.

Lorien will compile the comments and concerns from the group and submit them to BLM by the deadline.

Utah State Plan Updates

Alan Clark provided updates on how mitigation planning is developing under the state plan. A more thorough explanation will be provided at the Utah Summit in February. Alan discussed different potential approaches to mitigation, including onsite, offsite, sponsorship of projects (WRI or others), and mitigation/conservation banking, which would support a private-to-private trading system for sage-grouse habitat credits. Alan is working hard to setup a system that meets different needs and interests for how mitigation would work, as well as effectively conserving habitat. Once a proposal is made, it could be put into place via a governor's order. Alan noted that this is all just the nitty gritty of how to implement the 1:4 disturbance/mitigation ratio concept in the state plan. In this way, disturbance will actually be turned into a net benefit for sage-grouse.

Alan also explained that NRCS is heading up a major mapping project for pinyon-juniper. Eight states are involved, but Utah will be done first. The group will be able to see those maps once they have been created, ideally early this spring.

The group then broke for lunch.

Little Mountain Presentation and Discussion

Brian Maxfield gave a presentation to the group about the juniper removal projects on Little Mountain. He explained how birds were collared and tracked, and the information was then used to design projects to improve their habitat.

Little Mountain is a mountain just west of Vernal, with sage-brush on top that has experienced encroachment from PJ in recent years. There is tribal ground immediately adjacent to the BLM and SITLA parcels, so some collared birds could not be tracked onto tribal to determine an exact location. Different birds moved differently: some stayed on top and moved very little, whereas others moved a lot. The idea was to identify areas where PJ work could help increase the quality of the habitat they were using, or very close to where they were using it. Several PJ lop-and-scatter projects were planned and were just completed a few months ago, in fall of 2013.

There are no WRI projects proposed this year in the area, but they are working to develop more. Future projects will likely be mastication, not lop and scatter. Scott Chamberlain asked how many collars were left (there are two), and noted that it would be great to be able to determine whether any of the collared birds used the newly treated areas that they used to avoid.

Alan noted that this kind of work is ideal: find the birds, see where they are limited, and take action to help – in this case, enlarging the areas that they are using, since their movement seemed constrained by the lack of open sagebrush areas for nesting and brood-rearing. Treating Phase I juniper in this area was the way to do that.

NRCS Updates

Natasha provided NRCS updates.

- She is working with the tribe to expand their goals, such as opening up Little Water Flat
- There will soon be 250,000 fence markers provided by NRCS to hang on high-collision risk fences around the state. Private and state lands will receive priority, but federal lands may receive the markers as well. Volunteers will be needed to hang them. They are also not eligible to be used for existing NRCS contracts. Anyone with projects or volunteers should contact Natasha.

UPCD project updates

Then the meeting transitioned directly from the sage-grouse group into the UBPCD group. All WRI proposed projects related to sage-grouse, as well as others, were discussed at that meeting.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will provide the group with more information on the February sage-grouse summit in Salt Lake City
- Lorien will compile the comments from the group and submit them to BLM by the deadline.
- Stephanie will share the QEP comments at the next meeting as an educational opportunity for the group to better understand energy industry concerns.
- Anyone with fence marking projects or volunteers should contact Natasha.

Next Meeting:

The date for the spring meeting will depend on the availability of draft disturbance mapping products that UBARM is interested in reviewing.